



University of Iowa

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

Fall 10-1-2010

Writing Sample

Ismail Bala

Includes "The Writing Angel," "Dawn of Future (Chronicle of a Democracy foretold)," "The Poetry of Others," "Safe Keeping," "Zainabu," "The Bather," "The Mislaid Bracelet and the Bandaged Wrist," "The Crown of Love," "Sonnet," "Big Bodies," "Pears and Plums," "Poetry," "Life Will Do Nothing," "Rising from Death," "Just Like in the Horror Films," "The Exercise," "After and Before," "When I Gather My Short," "After the Lean Harvest, Lord, its Time" and "Where We Come From."

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Recommended Citation

Bala, Ismail, "Writing Sample" (2010). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 292.
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Ismail Bala

Poems

The Writing Angel

“I’ve brought a poem for you,” babbled the angel,
Descending by the desk on which I write.
“You can scribble it in your hand
(Here’s a plume from my feather to do that with).
Translate it from the heavenly dialect,
Appropriate to human comprehension.
You can append your own by-line above it
And rush it off to an editor—I don’t care.
But I must leave now—many of us,
A great number in fact, are called to attend
A function upon a needle’s top—that same needle
At whose left end big men and beasts
Slide into Paradise, trudging through its eye—
Dispossessed of their luggage. Writers
Have luggage too and sometimes act the same”.
Having revealed that, with gyrating of wings
The celestial body dashed off.

--

Dawn of Future

(Chronicle of a Democracy foretold)

I

Even though we see
Those who envelop our skies
Of agony dark
With clouds slated for
The rain of doom
We don’t pinch our eyes
To shed tears

We see quite openly
Those who scrounge the gusty air
Out of our perched noses
Those who starve us with rotten crumbs
From the communal bowl
Feed us to bleed
Bleed our veins dry
With untainted blood

We don't taint the nuance of our voices
With sobs of fear
Rather
We fortify our will
Harden the look of our dreamful eyes
Clasp our minds
Tie the bold knots of our long nights
To behold the dawn of future

We mould our shattered voices
To sing in the gay poetry
The sonorous jingles
Of our communal songs

We don't spare our eyes
On the famished sun
Nor laugh the laughter of an uncircumcised tongue
Rather we await the dawn of future.

II

With the faceful moon of your faith
Beaming the place
We shall wait for the malarial glance
To zoom itself out
Didn't we outplay the contagion shots of
The other day?

We shall wait for the day
That belongs neither to the rodents
Nor the hoppers
But to the lustre of our love
We shall wait for the appeal of April
To subdue the severance of silence

On this place you ransom with ruthlessness

Didn't we outplay the faces of fear
That plunders our lone hope of perseverance
Before it could glimpse the silhouette of life?
We shall wait for the day
That belongs neither to the vulture
Nor the hoppers
But maintain convenience for the preys
To tease ferocity out in the woods
And we will wait

With the anthem of your age
Mocking light
Mourning night
We shall tighten the grip
On the hands of time
For the tapped geyser of your eyes
To dissipate itself out
And your restless shutter contained
By the smiling sun of redeeming year.

--

The Poetry of Others

Is there no lull to it
the way they keep springing up in journals
then conclave in the inky chapel of an anthology?

You would think the daffodil would speak out,
but like the Muse it only inspires—then more of them appear.
Not even the authorities can put an end to it.

Just this morning, one accosted me like a beggar,
eyes squinting, difficult to ignore.
Another lunged out of the cover at me like a bully.

How can anybody despise them
when they hang about the hem of books

and humble themselves in our faces?

Perhaps I'm being mean, even frivolous.
It could have been the day at the circus
that left me this way—all the cast by the scripts—

as if only my poetry had the clout to be
and readers would come up from the heavens
in the morning to see them in cathedral of papery gods.

So I will take the word of the masters
and put this in a cooler for a week
possibly even a month or two and then have a harsher look at it—

but for the moment I'm going to take a breather
through this nearly greyed place
that is my harmattan hidey-hole, my scriptorium,

and get my eyes off the poetry of others
even as they look down from the shelves
or laugh at my feigning in the guise of local clowns.

after Billy Collins

Safe Keeping

Allow me to fetch
My dearest one
Fetch from the richness of your eyes
Allow me to pluck
My darling one
Pluck from your lavishing smile
Allow me to illuminate my being
My closest pal
Illuminate in the wealth of your merriment
From your magnificent face
Grant me this honour my charming one
And I'd carve out a luminous mirror
A spacious one
In such a mirror

A twin reflection looks back
Multiple reflections
From your incandescent face
I'd chisel out a star
A sparkling star
And beneath this star
They'd behold the true east
For all to witness
Behold still
Your haunting eyes and dazzling smile
On your glowing face
Forever shall be engraved
Engraved in the lettering of my inscription.

(Translated from the Hausa of Mustafa Bello Marka)

Zainabu

Love Tambai you did Zainabu Abu
Loved him like a ferocious winter blaze
You ditched Haliru (for his sake)
Despite thousands of your suitors
Such as Kabiru who loved you madly
But whom you've also forsaken (for Tambai)

Zainabu a true friend
So faithful you've been to Tambai
The one who initiated you into the art of love
The one full of feelings for you
He took you for what you are
Took you away from Razak

Great wonder it is, Zainabu
That after you've fallen for Tambai
After he has found you
Got hold of you
After you've given in to him
He then turned his back on you

What a world full of irony!
After you've suffered and resisted forced marriage
(Now) see how your husband let you down
Your emotional turmoil is inestimable
Behold your teary eyes
In an estranged land

Now what Zainabu?
In your present state of sorrow
With your many kids and matrimonial responsibility
Tambai is turning a new leaf
Taking a new wife
A girl named Laure
Zainabu what a sad event!
(Tambai has) done you a blow
By being a friend of Barau

He has gone into evil ways
Gone into womanizing
Tambai has abandoned the truth.

(Translated from Hausa of Salisu Saidu)

The Bather (after Charles Simic)

Where the road to the river snakes
Out of sort, a blaze of dust,
The kind naked winds make whirling.
A low sky hazy with clouds
Resting momentarily
In the tense but sober trees.

An early bather undressing for a dive,
Packed hair flowing down too soon
As she flaps on her arm allowing
The scary waves turn her
Over the sniggering water to where the sky
Shuts tight, the day darning

Her bareness, the splashing thin,
Cloud edges like jarred paper dolls,
Even the birds strangely reticent,
The hushed laughter of the winds in the leaves
Deceiving me to glance once again,
Till the urge led me out and plunged in.

The Mislaid Bracelet and the Bandaged Wrist
(A Variation on a Theme by C P Cavafy)

I

Now I turn and trudge back with you,
Our eyes rummaging the dirt for that bracelet,
Mid-day sun so cruel it seems the very light
Is being sabotaged and will soon be gone
As its vast furnace dissolves.

And you,
Squatting on your knees among pebbles and grass,
Your shadow, lost beneath the horizon encircling us,
Turns this submerged path into a wandering boat
Where now we'll continuously be together,
As time, dazzled by the day's splendour, ignores us,
And the blood throbs in your bare wrist.

II

She said she had injured herself on a staircase, or had tumbled,
but certainly there was some other reason
for the injury, for the bandaged wrist.

She was reaching up the top for a shot
she wanted to take more closely
when the bandage came unloose. A tiny blood ran.

I tied it up for her again, wasting far too much time

over the edging; she wasn't in pain,
and—to be candid—I liked starring at the blood.
That blood. It was all part of love.

When she left, I found a piece torn from the bandage
under her seat, a strip I should have dumped
straight in the bin—but I picked up and raised it to my nose,
and kept there a long time:
her blood on my nose, o dear, my beloved's blood.

The Crown of Love

Now autumn chews its leaves out of my hand: we are friends.
We take time off a nutshell and teach it how to move:
And time turns and saunters back to its shell.

Now it's Sunday in the mirror,
there's a space for a peaceful sleep in the dream,
the taste of truth is in the mouth.

My eyes shift to the belly of my beloved:
we stare at each other,
we utter darkness to each other,
we love each other like poppy and memory,
we sleep in seashells like wine,
like the sea in the crimson beams of the moon.

We stop at the window embracing, from the street they can see us,
it is time they knew!
it is time the stone allow itself grow into flower,
that the unrest have a heartbeat.
It is time there was time.

It is time.

(From the German of Paul Celan based on literal, prose version by Michael Hamburger)

Sonnet

(For Robert Pinsky)

Morning sun on his back,
slow irretrievable splodge
of water against a rock.

Thick grass clambering
over the mountain's top—
nothing to report,

only the same river
that keeps repeating the same
routine under his nose

and bearing the same mood.
Nobody to sing his song,
no need, no one to celebrate him,

only the river's words—over
and over, to keep it before him.

Big Bodies

It is almost dark. In the river
the frog croak,
and the innocent grass have pushed forth
their many alluring trap,
and the water is tremulous.
It is difficult sometimes, dear Lord,
to be cheerful.
I am more mildly made
than the small fishes, giggling and swaddling.
But not so mild
as the water
with its greedy mouth.
I know you know nothing—

I defend on this.
Still, there are so many big bodies in the world,
for which I am scared.

After Mary Oliver

Pears and Plums

(A Variation on a Theme by Paul Muldoon; in memory of Yehuda Amichai)

To assume that, as a girl of fourteen, I would struggle
with my first pear,
its naked breast
presenting itself as another trial
of my self-control, knowing in my eyes
that it represented something other than itself alone
while having utterly no idea
of its being a universal symbol of brevity.
Brevity—right? Not temerity, if you understand
what I am digging at. As if the open mouth
might, for now, rule out
the verbal hatred
in one area of the world.
I'm talking about pears—right?—not plums.

Poetry

Found Poem, (from *The Resistance to Poetry* by James Longenbach)

Poems inspire our trust because they don't ask to be trusted,
Theirs is the language of self questioning.
Metaphors that turn against themselves,
Syntax that moves one way because it threatens to move another.
Poems resist themselves more strenuously than they are resisted;
But resistance to poetry is the wonder of poetry:
We read poetry not to escape difficulty but to embrace it.

Life Will Do Nothing

Life will do nothing to advance your cause
For all that you were allowed to do:
Death and its circumferences are the same,

And when they hack the scores down for the game,
You'll get no marks for being yourself;
Life will do nothing to advance your cause.

Nor should it please that somebody is to celebrate
For the loose resolve or the good preview:
Death and its circumferences are the same.

You looked and laughed: orders are rescinded.
Among the known, you are unknown as, "What?"
Life can do nothing to advance your cause.

Your trap door won't prise open? That's a fact,
It surely is, my friend. And yet it's wrong;
Death and its circumferences are the same.

And no one is stoking the ephemeral flame.
A needless action, for you always knew
Life would do nothing to advance your cause:
Death and its circumferences are the same.

Rising from Death

Last night, while the stars were present, I
watched Amanda wipe death from
her face. Watched her hummed her way up
the road and saw all the mourners surprised, paper
cups frozen at their
mouths while their elegies about celebrating evil and the
pleasure of death, stammered.

Halted. Now the morning, just spun, looks
lazy, tired, as if dawn itself were spent. As if
it laboured to lay-up the light. Its heavy
brow wrinkled with
rain. On the road a timid tree trembles, the light a
pitcher on her clumsy hands.

Just Like in the Horror Films

Just like in the horror films
when the character realises that the telephone calls
are blaring from within the house

so too, I discovered
that our passionate over-doting
has been playing itself only within me.

All that tenderness, the kisses and dates—
it's just been me ringing myself
then picking up the call in another room

to find nobody on the other end,
except, sometimes a scaring chuckling
but most of the time, silence.

To know that all this while—
which would include the jolly rides,
the hobby hugs, and all the gifts—

it's been only me and a couple of phones,
this one on the corner at the attic
and the other in the cobwebbed spare room downstairs.

-

The Exercise

In the morning when I found Death
sleeping lazily on the sofa,
I took up her parasol from the rack
and placed its height over my head.

It would cover me on the hot walk
into the town for bread and the lighter
and I believed she would not care,
not after our short chat the day before.

How unheralded her glistering fury
when I returned drenched with rain,
the way she looked through the intricate wires
making sure no major character or Andean queen
had live on and become eternal in the heavy rain.

After and Before

I want to reach there late when the mopping
has since been done and you can't smell detergent.
Or when, in the restaurant, tomato and onion
walk all the way down the salad and the garnishing's
just right. Or after the shop closes, when mountains
of mangoes and pineapples still exhibit sign of ageing.
When the lawn's been formerly raked, the roses raided
and everything said that could be misinterpreted.

Or before. When traces of tyres and flattened cans
show where the campfire has been lit.
When the beds are done and the guests ushered.
When the repair van drives in and the house
seems like a crime-scene. When there is all the traffic.
When everything has gone right that is going to go right,
all the fixings have been done and grasses begin
to find their ways through the garden.

When I Gather My Short

When I gather my short
pitch-black hair
and weave of it a bun

and tie the knot of my head
and place it back
with iron ribbons

I'm on your face again
my eyes are on the sky
my vision is distance upon distance

I sense you sticking the devil
on my head and the thin plait
of you within me

I'm set now to leave
a grim public plaza
where I am the busker the judge a seer

I tilt my head
and everyone I look
feels what it can be to be looked at

After the Lean Harvest, Lord, its Time

After the lean harvest, Lord, its time
to lay your hands firmer on the hourglass
and in the night let the wild ghosts prowl.

As for the fulsome fruits, hasten them to sweetness.
Beam on them three days of gentler wind
to tango them down towards their time, and hound
the final few tinges of brightness through the day.

Whosoever's penniless now, will save no dime;
who lives aloof will live continuously so,
wandering on to write wee, drab oblong poems,

and, along the town's alleys,
ruefully ponder, when the giant gloom retires.

Where We Come From

Old habits live long, as in class
we pass the pen between us like a stamp
of despair. One of you today.
The demeanours are different, little passions
bursting up across the desk. They have put
a book on the side over which
we tactfully ignore our memory.

How do you dream? Something fishy
like Our Vow flips out. I know
you are still too thrifty to pay the debt.
Our new hearts wait behind us surprisingly,
with the silent shocks. I think
of all the easiness of gain but, yes,
I'm satisfied now. Yes. Satisfied. Now.

Dear, whatever it was that filled
such bound pages with word
has long been done. It is a book,
measures history. Perhaps the cover.
I see our ethics continuously eroded as
you switch to yours the manner you used
to switch to me. I switch to mine. And
